

It's Good to Talk! A Multidimensional Qualitative Study of the Effectiveness of Emotional Literacy Work in Schools

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This paper reports on a small-scale research study evaluating the work of an emotional literacy project in the North West of England. The purpose of the evaluation was threefold: to assess the degree of success of the emotional literacy project in achieving its aims; to capture and disseminate learning of what works, with whom and in which context, when promoting emotional literacy; and to provide policy makers and practitioners within the LEA, and beyond, with research evidence upon which best practice can be delivered to children, young people and their families. A multi-dimensional qualitative study was designed to explore the views of children, young people, parents/carers, headteachers, teachers, project workers and allied professionals regarding the emotional literacy project from their own perspective. The findings contribute to the growing body of research evidence on, and models of best practice in, promoting the emotional well being of children and young people. © 2006 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2006 National Children's Bureau

Introduction

The term 'emotional literacy' was first used by Steiner (1979). Drawing primarily, though not exclusively, on Eric Berne's theory of transactional analysis, Steiner envisioned emotional literacy as a tool of human emancipation. The term 'emotional intelligence' was coined by Salovey and Mayer (1989/1990) in the context of their research linking the affective (emotional) and cognitive (intellectual) domains. Following this, others (Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1996) began to express dissatisfaction with traditional definitions of intelligence in western culture. They identified 'emotional intelligence' or 'emotional literacy' as important, suggesting that positive emotions influence concentration, memory, problem solving and learning skills; positive relationships enable individuals to break out of dysfunctional patterns; emotional literacy promotes creativity, innovation and leadership and emotional literacy has a measurable impact on the performance of organisations.

The notions of emotional literacy and mental health are closely interrelated as, according to the Mental Health Foundation (1998, p. 15), 'emotionally literate children are less likely to experience mental health problems and, if they develop them, are less likely to suffer long term.' Steiner's definition of emotional literacy articulates strongly with those components considered indicative of positive mental health:

The ability to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually; the ability to become aware of others and how to empathize with them; the ability to use psychological distress as a developmental process. (National Health Service Health Advisory Service, 1995, p. 15)

Daniel Goleman observed the detrimental consequences of the neglect of the emotional well-being of a generation of children and young people in the 1990s. He cited a worldwide survey of parents and teachers demonstrating that these children were 'more troubled emotionally ... more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive' (Goleman, 1996, p. xiii). This message struck a chord with many educators disillusioned with the dominant political discourses of markets, performance, targets and competition. 'Emotional intelligence' or 'emotional literacy' quickly became buzz words and the catalyst for a progressive movement to reassert the importance of emotional development within education (Orbach, 1998).

The emotional literacy movement is not restricted to the arena of education. Indeed, a broad constituency of professionals and lay people have recognised the scope for emotional literacy programmes as a preventive tool in promoting the mental health of children and young people. A number of organisations also promote emotional literacy – such as Antidote: the Campaign for Emotional Literacy (established 1995) and the National Emotional Literacy Interest Group (established 2000). Their activities are targeted at a wide range of people from homes and communities, schools and nurseries to businesses and government.

Similarly, the emotional health and well-being of children and young people has been a prominent theme in Department of Health and Department for Education and Employment/Skills literature in recent years. In this, the role of emotional literacy development has been both implicit and explicit in many policy initiatives such as: the National Healthy Schools Standard (Department of Health, 1999), the Learning Mentor strand of the 'Excellence in Cities' Programme (Department for Education and Employment, 1999), the Children's National Service Framework (Department of Health, 2003a) and Every Child Matters (Department of Health, 2003b).

Emotional literacy in schools

The recognition of emotional literacy as an important preventive strategy in the promotion of mentally healthy children and young people has significant implications for schools. According to Antidote (2002), schools promote emotional literacy by firstly, supporting staff to develop the emotional resources they require to help young people develop their potential; secondly, creating opportunities for students to learn from and with each other through collaborative work that addresses both the emotional and intellectual aspects of learning and thirdly, motivating staff, teachers, pupils and parents by exploring with them what they should be studying, how learning is best encouraged and how schools might be managed.

One of the most popular models used to promote emotional literacy in the educational curriculum is Moseley's (1993, 1996) Circle Time. Circle Time, with its speaking rounds, open forum, drama approaches, games and role play provides a democratic group listening system, offering participants an opportunity to discuss concerns, debate moral issues, practise positive behaviour and solve problems in a safe environment. It helps children to understand their behaviour and the responses of others to that behaviour. It enables children to gain mastery over otherwise overwhelming emotional impulses, thereby enhancing their confidence and self-esteem.

The successful use of Circle Time has been evidenced in a number of small-scale projects and research studies (see for example, Johnson, 2001; Mental Health Foundation, 2001; Thomson, 2001; Wigley, 2001). Reported benefits include increased incidence of positive

behaviours (e.g. sensitivity to others feelings, self-control, awareness of consequences of behaviour); reduced incidence of negative behaviours; enhanced performance at KS1 and KS2; improvements in children's self-esteem; making children feel listened to and influential in decision-making; enhancement of children's problem-solving capacities; prevention of exclusions; providing an opportunity to make school behaviour policies meaningful and providing opportunities for collaborative working, sharing skills and expertise among staff.

Another model used to promote emotional literacy in schools is peer support or peer mentoring. Peer support/mentoring programmes encourage the capacity of pupils to turn to and help each other with their anxieties. This can take different forms such as drop-in sessions; play-ground 'buddying'; homework/lunchtime clubs and facilitating key transitions e.g. Year 6–7. Research findings to date indicate significant benefits where peer support/mentoring programmes have been developed (see for example, Cowie and Hutson, 2005; Cowie and others, 2002; Mental Health Foundation, 2002) including increased self confidence; increased self esteem; acquisition of communication skills; greater sensitivity to others; improved interpersonal skills; enhanced sense of responsibility; development of problem-solving skills; development of conflict resolution skills; reduction of stress levels in pupils; reduction in incidents of bullying; promotion of 'caring community' school ethos and pupils feel safer.

These examples represent just two of the many and varied approaches encompassed within the broad definition of emotional literacy work. Weare and Gray (2003) cite research evidence from across the spectrum of work in this area that demonstrates positive outcomes in terms of greater educational and work success; improvements in behaviour; increased inclusion; improved learning; greater social cohesion and improvements to mental health.

Research context

The emotional literacy project under evaluation was established in 1999. It has delivered more than 80 emotional literacy programmes to some 1290 children, 68 parents and 245 teaching/support staff, incorporating Circle Time; circle of friends peer support schemes; anger management work; stress management work; emotional literacy booklet for parents; emotional literacy groups for parents; emotional literacy training for various groups including learning mentors, school staff and local authority officers and an emotional literacy resource collection.

The strategic aim of the project is to facilitate positive mental health in the children and young people in the local education authority through the promotion of emotional literacy, while its specific aims are to:

- improve the self-esteem of children and young people;
- maximise the capacities of parents/carers in facilitating the emotional development of their children;
- enhance the capacity for children and young people to help each other with their anxieties;
- cascade skills and knowledge of how to promote emotional literacy amongst teachers and other professionals;
- promote the adoption of whole-school approaches to emotional literacy and
- develop a partnership approach to practise with other colleagues working in the field of emotional literacy.

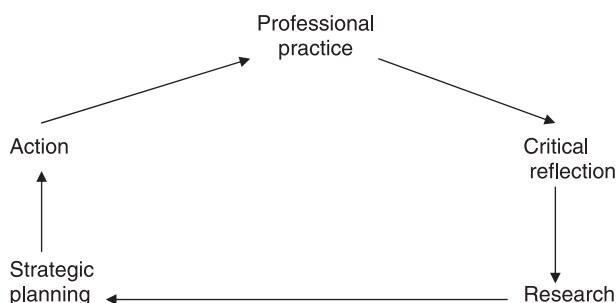


Figure 1: Action research cycle

Methodological approach

The national emphasis in health, education and social care policy and practice is on the need for 'evidence-based practice' (Department of Health, 1998) and it is entirely appropriate that practitioners should be accountable for their interventions and should be confident in the knowledge of what works best. However, the approach to this evaluation was based on the view that interventions centred on complex human relationships require methodologies capable of embracing that complexity and that overly simplistic, quantitative approaches to evaluation fail to do justice to the inherently complex world of practice (Reynolds and Trinder, 2000).

Furthermore, the approach to the evaluation was consistent with the equally important emphasis on consulting with, and listening to, children and young people (see, for example, Department of Health, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003a,b). This requires an approach to research and evaluation that enables the voices of children and young people to be heard and the creation of decision-making structures that facilitate their empowerment (Alderson, 1995; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Armstrong and others, 1998). Thus the evaluation was designed and implemented using an inclusive and collaborative approach to research. This process included all those directly involved in the project activities. A statement of ethical practice governing the research was prepared and discussed with all participants and the level and nature of participation of individuals/groups within the research was continually explored and negotiated. Particular attention was paid to those typologies that have been developed to clarify the level of commitment to children's and young people's participation in research (for example, Hart, 1992).

A further priority in the evaluation was to improve practice, therefore a cyclical 'action research' process was adopted (Figure 1).

Research questions

A number of guiding research questions were formulated based on the identified aims of the project as follows:

- What has been the impact of the project on the emotional well-being of the children and young people who have directly participated in the project's activities?
- What has been the impact of the project on parents/carers teachers and other practitioners who have participated in the project's activities?

- Has the project facilitated (i) project workers (ii) teachers and other practitioners to engage in critical consideration of their practice?
- What has been the impact of the project in promoting schools in the local education authority as emotionally safe and healthy environments?
- How effective has the project been in increasing knowledge and understanding of emotional literacy within the local education authority?
- What has been the level and impact of partnership working?
- Do the project activities constitute a model of good practice that can be replicated in other settings?

Methods

A variety of qualitative methods were used to facilitate exploration of these questions. Focus group meetings were arranged with the children, parents/carers, teachers, learning mentors, headteachers, project workers and the researcher to enter into dialogue about the research and its conduct. Parents/carers and project workers were invited to keep diaries in which they would record and reflect on their experiences of participating in the activities of the project. One-to-one and group interviews were conducted with children, parents/carers, teachers, learning mentors, headteachers and project workers. Thematic interview schedules were used as a guide to discussion. Their design was broadly based on the research questions driving the evaluation. The researcher conducted the majority of these interviews; however, a group of children who were experienced in the emotional literacy activities of the project were invited to act as peer researchers for one area of the evaluation. A wider constituency of professionals within and outside the project (e.g. partner organisations, allied agencies) were also identified and interviewed throughout the period of evaluation. Evaluation data were also generated from other sources such as internal project evaluation reports; the use of standardised measurement tools such as the B/G-STEEM test and an audit of emotional literacy activity commissioned by the local education authority in March 2003.

Recruitment of research participants

The research participants comprised three main groups: two groups of primary school children, their respective headteachers, teachers and learning mentors; one group of parents/carers and a wider constituency of headteachers, teachers, learning mentors and allied professionals.

The primary school groups

Initial contact was made with the headteachers of two neighbouring primary schools to explore the potential for participation in the research. The project team was involved in emotional literacy programmes in both schools, but had more experience of running programmes in one school (school A) than in the other (school B). Introductory focus group meetings were held at each school and involved the headteacher, relevant class teacher and learning mentor, the researcher and two members of the project team. The proposed research was fully explained and discussed. Full co-operation was obtained from the staff group and permission to proceed to the next stage – the recruitment of the parents and children.

Invitations and consent forms were sent out via the schools to the parents of Year 6 children in school A and Year 5 children of school B. The Year 6 children from school A were using Circle Time regularly and had participated in a peer mentoring programme during Year 5. The Year 5 children, class teacher and learning mentor at school B were about to use Circle Time and peer mentoring for the first time. The intention was to invite the Year 6 children from school A to act as peer researchers in evaluating the experiences of the Year 5 children at school B regarding Circle Time and peer mentoring. A meeting was held for parents to meet the researcher and ask any further questions about the research. Consent forms were obtained for 12 of the Year 6 children from school A and the whole class of Year 5 children from school B.

The parent group

Prior to the start of an emotional literacy programme for a group of primary school parents the researcher met with the parents, project worker and learning mentor in a focus group discussion to explore the potential for participation in the research. Letters of invitation and consent forms were left with the parents for consideration. All six parents subsequently gave their consent to participate.

The wider constituency of professionals

A small sample of headteachers, teachers, learning mentors and allied professionals from across the borough were invited to participate in the research. Their inclusion was intended to provide a broader perspective on the impact of the project.

The research process

The primary school groups

The intention was to use individual and focus group interviews to explore (i) the views of both groups of children regarding Circle Time and peer mentoring; (ii) the views of the class teachers and learning mentors of both schools regarding Circle Time and peer mentoring; and (iii) explore whether there are any lasting benefits to the use of Circle Time and peer mentoring programmes.

An initial focus group meeting was held with 12 Year 6 children from school A, their learning mentor, project worker and the researcher to explain and discuss the research more fully; to ensure that the children were happy to proceed as both research participants and peer researchers and to explore the children's reflections and attitudes towards their experiences of Circle Time and peer mentoring. A similar meeting was held with the children at school B, their teacher, learning mentor, project worker and the researcher to explain and discuss the research more fully and to ensure the children were happy to proceed.

Two further meetings were then held with the school A children in preparation for their role as peer researchers. These meetings were used to formulate the key themes and issues they

wanted to explore in the first focus group interview with the Year 5 children from school B; to plan the session, agreeing which activities to do and allocating roles and tasks and to rehearse/role play the interview session.

The peer researchers decided that the first focus group interview should explore the hopes and fears of the school B children about doing Circle Time and peer mentoring for the first time. This arose directly from their reflections on their own experiences explored in session 1. They all remembered feeling anxious, and not knowing what to expect and would have liked an opportunity to share these anxieties and to be reassured. It was suggested by one of the children, and agreed by all, that the interview session should be modelled on Circle Time itself, demonstrating how it works to the school B children. This was made in the format of a circle within a circle – the school A children occupying the inner circle, demonstrating Circle Time and peer mentoring, with the school B children forming the outer circle, observing. There was then a question and answer exchange with the inner circle turning to face the outer circle. The researcher acted as observer and recorder during this first interview session. A debriefing was held after the first group interview. The children were full of enthusiasm and there was a sense of achievement.

For the next two months attention was focused on the peer mentoring programme with the children at school B. The children completed B/G STEEM questionnaires prior to and after the programme. Additionally, the class teacher and learning mentor monitored changes in the emotionally literate behaviour of the children after each weekly session using a simple rating scale devised by the project worker.

At the end of the programme the peer researchers reconvened to plan and prepare for the follow-up focus group interview at school B. The agreed purpose of the interview this time was to find out what the school B children thought about, and whether they understood the meaning of, Circle Time and peer mentoring. The peer researchers decided upon the format for the session. The school B children were to be asked to demonstrate Circle Time and peer mentoring to the peer researchers; small group interviews were to be conducted with two of the peer researchers talking to five or six children from school B—one researcher to ask questions, one to record the answers; all would participate in some Circle Time games at the end and finally the peer researchers would thank school B children for their involvement. A final debriefing meeting was held at school A where the peer researchers were invited to reflect on and identify the key messages from the research interviews; and reflect on the experience of being a peer researcher.

The parent group

The researcher met with the parents, learning mentor and project worker at the beginning of the parents emotional literacy programme to explain and discuss the research more fully; to ensure the parents felt comfortable participating in the research and to distribute diaries in which the parents would record their thoughts and feelings about being involved in the emotional literacy programme each week. The project worker and learning mentor then took the parents through the planned programme over the following months. At the end of the programme the parents allowed the researcher access to their diaries for analysis. A further group meeting was held with the parents some months later for further reflection and discussion.

Table 1: Research findings in relation to project aims

Project aim	Performance indicators	Source of evidence
To improve the self-esteem of children and young people	Positive evidence of lasting improvements in children's self-esteem	Children's self-reports Peer research process Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Project worker reports/diaries
To maximise the capacity of parents/carers in facilitating the emotional development of their children	Positive evidence of enhanced parental concern with emotional literacy issues in relation to themselves and their children	Parents' self-reports/diaries Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Project worker reports/diaries
To enhance the capacity for children and young people to help each other with their anxieties	Positive evidence of peer support skills and activities	Children's self-reports Peer research process Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Project worker reports/diaries
To cascade skills and knowledge of how to promote emotional literacy amongst teachers and other professionals	Positive evidence of practitioners developing skills and implementing emotional literacy in their schools	Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Project video Project worker reports/diaries Audit (March 2003)
To promote the adoption of whole-school approaches to emotional literacy	Evidence to indicate support for the principle of whole-school approaches but barriers to implementation are identified	Headteacher reports Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Project worker reports/diaries
To develop a partnership approach to practice with other colleagues working in the field of emotional literacy	Positive evidence of collaborative/partnership working	Headteacher reports Teacher reports Learning mentor reports Emotional Literacy Steering Group Audit (March 2003)

The wider constituency of professionals

A series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken broadly based on the key research questions driving the evaluation.

Research findings

Thematic presentation of qualitative research findings

The children

A number of themes emerged from the children's self-reports, focus group interviews and peer research that were consistent with the aims of the project (Table 1). These included:

- improvements in self-esteem;
- improvements in self-confidence;
- learning about other people's feelings/points of view;
- more friends;

- better relationships and
- helping others.

The following quotations represent the children's general reflections on the positive impact of Circle Time, circle of friends and peer mentoring programmes they have been involved in through the project.

If you feel sad or happy you say what your feelings are. You don't have to, but if you do you'll be helped out.

I found it hard to share feelings but can now.

It feels safe.

I think it was fun and it built up my confidence.

I think Circle Time is good because I can listen to people's feelings.

It was useful to share and I got to know people better.

I think it is good because it helps us all to get on better.

At first I didn't understand what it was but now I've got more friends.

I didn't used to have friends.

It was good to be kind to people you don't really talk to.

It was great and the skills what I learned was to be kind to each other.

It was good because we learned to be friends and not calling each other names.

I've learned to respect people.

It's good, teachers don't shout.

It became clear from the first focus group session with the Year 6 children from school A that there had been sustained benefits from their participation in the peer mentoring programme the previous year. They demonstrated excellent interpersonal skills and related to each other in a caring and supportive way. They applied these skills to great effect in the peer research process. They were eager and enthusiastic learners and worked incredibly hard to make the research a great success. They reflected on the experience of doing peer research as follows:

I got more confidence going to another school and helping them.

I liked going to (school B) doing Circle Time and talking to them.

I feel more confident. (School B) made you feel welcome.

I've learned more about other people's feelings and point of view.

It's brought more confidence for everyone. We felt embarrassed at first, but then it felt better.

Following their focus group sessions with the Year 5 children from school B, the peer researchers concluded that the children they interviewed had benefited from the peer mentoring programme. They reported having observed positive evidence of emotional literacy skills including:

- listening to others;
- not interrupting;
- overcoming shyness to speak up and
- respecting each other.

The parents

A number of themes emerged from the parents' diaries and focus group interviews that were consistent with the aims of the project. These included:

- increased awareness of the impact of feelings/emotions;
- learning to express oneself more effectively and thereby control anger/shouting at children;
- acknowledgement that looking after oneself is important in order to look after one's children;
- affirmation of self/self-worth;
- benefits of sharing deep emotions – calming, de-stressing;
- caring and sharing;
- trusting/friendship/bonding/support;
- impact of one's past on current behaviour;
- learning to stop and think and
- being honest in communication of feelings of hurt.

The following extracts from the parents' diaries exemplify these themes:

In today's session I found that whenever anyone does something wrong, especially my children, I go in all guns blazing and hell breaks out. What I have come away with is looking at the whole picture and think and consider how my children are feeling about the situation. If I become angry, to walk away then come back and ask my children what has happened in a calm and quiet manner, and try to resolve the problem. And help them understand.

Today made me realise that noticing other people and ourselves and people realising and actually acknowledging us can make us feel great ... also I had to look deep into myself to find out what actions and comments of others offended me or made me feel good about myself.

Today's session was about our feelings and behaviour. I thought in some parts was quite heavy and brought out some deep feelings about past things which I wouldn't normally wish to talk or think about, but I'm glad I did.

This week's session was very emotionally deep. I think we all revealed something that made us feel better to talk about but also made us feel very teary. But I also think it done all of us good to let it out.

This course has been very positive for me regardless of the very sad memories that I have been dealing with. But it has helped me speak about things that I would never normally have the chance or the security of our group to do so, and I would like to thank you for giving me that chance. I would also like to thank the rest of our group for listening and caring, but most of all for not judging me as a person.

It has certainly made me see you may see a person or child everyday and you may not even scratch the surface of their emotions.

I just wish things like this were around when I was a young child because maybe I would not find it hard to show or tell people my feelings ... thanks to this course I'm doing my own Berlin Wall, slowly one brick at a time is being chipped away.

I don't think any of us would have believed we would all know each other by the end on a more open and deep level.

A follow-up focus group interview was conducted six months after the end of the parents' emotional literacy programme. The parents reflected further on the benefits they had gained from participating in the group. They all agreed that the group was fantastic, that it had changed them and the way they relate to their children. They felt it had forced them to talk about things that they would never reveal to anyone out in the real world. In this, they drew particular attention to the need for somewhere safe to talk. They valued confidentiality within the group and the trust that had developed between them. One parent shared that it is still a struggle to be consistent in responding positively to her children, but now she is much more self-aware and 'keeps working at it'. All felt that the parents' emotional literacy programme should be available to parents on a permanent, ongoing basis. Finally, all wanted to see Circle Time become part of the school curriculum as they consider their children's emotional development to be just as important as their intellectual development.

The professionals

A number of themes emerged from the interviews with various practitioners that were consistent with the aims of the project. These included:

- observed positive impact of emotional literacy programmes on behaviour and emotional well-being of children – e.g. increased confidence, ability to articulate feelings, calmer, more relaxed, assertiveness, improved listening skills, speaking skills;
- observed positive impact of emotional literacy programmes on children's relationships – e.g. conflict resolution, inclusivity, more cohesion, respect for each other, empathy;
- observed positive impact of emotional literacy programmes on the whole-school environment – e.g. 'snowball' effect, extension of Circle Time to whole school;
- observed positive impact of emotional literacy programmes on the capacities of parents/carers;
- positive impact of project worker's role as mentor and trainer in emotional literacy skills and knowledge;
- enhanced self-confidence in using emotional literacy techniques and
- positive experiences of collaborative working in delivering emotional literacy programmes.

Many of these themes are evident in the following quotations:

The children show their feelings in a positive way. (Teacher)

More awareness of self and others. Developing concentration and able to follow instructions. (Teacher)

Helping them to listen to each other and given them the confidence to speak to the class. (Teacher)

Confidence, improving self esteem and listening skills. (Teacher)

Brought out many skills in both children and adults involved. (Learning mentor)

It's good to have time out to listen and really get to know each child. (Teacher)

Getting a different insight into their personalities and views. (Teacher)

The project has really taken emotional literacy forward and given it prominence in the borough. (Learning mentor)

It is very useful for learning mentors to be able to work collaboratively with the child guidance project developing emotional literacy skills. (Learning mentor)

The beauty of the project worker was that she was seen as neutral, non-stigmatising. (Learning mentor)

We haven't got a whole school approach yet, but it's going in the right direction. (Teacher and learning mentor)

We need to convince some of the older, more conservative teachers that it works. (Learning mentor)

The parents have been asking when the next Parents' Group is starting! (Learning mentor)

I've carried on the Circle Time and Circle of Friends because I know now that it really does work! (Teacher)

I wouldn't have had the confidence to do it if I hadn't had the input from the project worker – she was brilliant! (Teacher)

Wider themes arising from the research

A number of wider themes emerged from the evaluation that pointed to the significance of factors beyond the immediate scope of the project.

Definitional confusion around 'emotional literacy'

Evidence from the research pointed to a shared understanding of the importance of children and young people's emotional development. However, the participants did not share a common language to describe, and had different knowledge and understanding of, the

term 'emotional literacy'. This diversity did not simply reflect the distinction between lay and professional discourse but significant conceptual differences between professional groups. A wide range of terminology is used in the field and across agencies. This is not to suggest that there is right and wrong terminology, rather that the lack of an agreed common language can have negative consequences. Firstly, it can contribute to a fragmented approach to practice. This is reflected in the observation that teachers usually referred to the usefulness of particular activities, such as 'doing Circle Time', but did not recognise these activities as part of an overall strategy to promote emotional literacy. Secondly, it can lead to unnecessary duplication of work. This is reflected in the observation that practitioners are often engaged in very similar, if not the same, activities, but call them different things. This is not an uncommon problem (see Weare and Gray, 2003). The various professionals working in this field need to work towards achieving greater commonality of terminology in order to facilitate a joined-up strategic response to service delivery.

Role confusion

This issue is closely related to that above. The process of evaluation revealed that activities to promote emotional literacy are not solely located within one agency within the local education authority. Participants were often unclear about the organisational location of the emotional literacy project, as they had contact and/or involvement with other practitioners within the local education authority concerning emotional literacy. It was evident that rather than an awareness of the strategic role of the project *per se*, participants tended to identify primarily with individual practitioners as and when they initiated contact. Again, this is not uncommon. Weare and Gray (2003) identified the need for local education authorities to work towards finding an agreed strategic location for work in this area.

Structural barriers to the development of whole-school approaches

Concerning the extent to which the project facilitated whole-school approaches to emotional literacy, respondents consistently indicated that the project had cultivated a positive attitude towards, and had done a great deal to facilitate such a goal. However, there were concerns about the feasibility of developing whole-school approaches given the existence of structural barriers to its achievement. Specifically, reference was made to five obstacles. Firstly, the demands of the National Curriculum on schools and teachers' time invariably means that emotional literacy activities are treated as marginal rather than integral. Secondly, dominant concerns with traditional approaches to learning (the three Rs) and educational 'achievement' also serve to marginalise emotional literacy within the curriculum. Thirdly, some schools and teachers are suspicious of emotional literacy initiatives seeing them as just another passing fad in education. Antidote (2002) emphasise the need to promote teachers' insights into the crucial role of emotional literacy factors in the process of learning. Fourthly, schools and teachers do not recognise any strategic approach to emotional literacy within the local education authority to facilitate whole-school approaches. Finally, there is little recognition of the emotional support needs of the practitioners working within the local education authority. These five themes recur frequently in the literature and are consistent with other research findings (e.g. Antidote, 2002; Thomson, 2001; Weare and Gray, 2003).

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated both the feasibility and the value of multidimensional qualitative research in the evaluation of professional practice with children, young people and their families. Specifically, the research findings support the conclusion that this project has demonstrated significant success in meeting its aims. Generally, they confirm and reinforce existing research evidence of the value of emotional literacy work in promoting positive mental health in children and young people. Nevertheless, significant limitations to the development of a strategic, co-ordinated approach to emotional literacy have been identified both locally and nationally. These must be addressed as a matter of urgency in order that such models of best practice are harnessed and disseminated to make a wider positive impact on the emotional well-being of children and young people.

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